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By: **Derek Stanovsky**

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Remix Racism: The Visual Politics of the “Alt-Right”

Derek Stanovsky*

Making use of Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Freud’s notion of “repetition compulsion,” and contemporary remix theory, this essay examines the rise of the “alt-right,” the grafting of white supremacist ideas onto popular culture iconography, their migration into mainstream political discourse, as well as some anti-fascist uses of remix culture.

Keywords: alt-right, anti-fascism, anti-Semitism, mechanical reproduction, racism, remix, repetition compulsion

Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours. But the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.

-Paul Valéry, PIÈCES SUR L’ART, “La Conquête de l’ubiquité,” Paris.

This essay is about punching Nazis. More exactly, it is about the tremendous changes in our practice of art and the impacts of this on our politics, including the politics of representation surrounding Nazis and Nazi punching. The “profound changes ... in the ancient craft of the Beautiful” announced by Paul Valéry in the quote above are still taking place today. Our digital culture has accelerated the pace of change and readily lent itself to a political repurposing of art and culture. Memes and mashups have taken their place alongside photographs and phonograph records as ways art can be experienced, transposed, and re-experienced in new contexts never anticipated by the original artists. Walter Benjamin begins his influential 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” with the quote above from Valéry.¹ Benjamin uses these words to set the stage for his own Marxist analysis of the changes our mechanized material culture has wrought in the production and consumption of art. Benjamin’s insight was to trace the transformed and revolutionized technologies of artistic production to the also transformed and revolutionized social relations of artistic production. In short, Valéry’s quote and Benjamin’s essay point to changes not just in the ways art was produced by the artist, but also to changes in the social and political relationships between artist and audience.

However, as Marx reminds us in *The Communist Manifesto*, “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with

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¹ Walter Benjamin, Harry Zohn, Hannah Arendt, and Leon Wieseltier, *Illuminations*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 217.

them the whole relations of society.”² The revolutions in artistic production have continued apace in the years since Benjamin wrote his essay. Benjamin’s focus was on the anti-fascist potential of modern methods for the production, reproduction, transmission, and dissemination of art in film, radio, and photography. Martin Jay writes, “politics has to be saved from its reduction to spellbinding spectacle and phantasmagoric illusion.”³ The spectacle of recent Presidential politics in the United States has been on display for all to see. Benjamin’s hope was that our politics can be rescued from the glitzy, loud, and mesmerizing veneer of Fascism by more articulate and more democratic uses of our emerging cultural technologies.

Neither fascism, nor anti-fascist struggles have remained static during the intervening decades since Benjamin’s death. The technological means for the production of art have continued to be transformed as well especially, through the recent proliferation of digital media and the spread of remix culture. This essay draws on the work of Benjamin, along with that of Sigmund Freud, to highlight some of the unexpected twists our art and politics have taken during the run up to the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. In particular, it focuses on the ways racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia are currently being sampled and remixed by white nationalists and fascists of the so-called “alt-right” into newly virulent hybrid forms. These new forms are now reemerging into the cultural mainstream after being remixed with contemporary popular culture content online. This essay will make use of remix theory to analyze and trace the rejuvenation of these fascist images, the grafting of white supremacist ideas onto popular culture iconography, and their migration and spillover into mainstream political discourse over the course of the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign culminating in the election of Donald Trump.

Remix and Repetition

David Gunkel’s recent book, *Of Remixology*, provides a useful starting point for discussing the current terrain of remix culture and politics. Gunkel writes, “‘Remix’ generally refers to the practice of recombining preexisting media content – popular songs, films, television programs, texts, web data – to fabricate new work.”⁴ He then offers a discussion of the wide variety of terminologies often encountered alongside, and in place of, the word “remix.” Collage, sample, bootleg, mashup, remix each receive their own separate sections, but Gunkel notes:

The list of currently available terms is quite diverse: “collage,” “*détournement*,” “bricolage,” “pastiche,” “culture jamming,” “sampling,” “cut and paste,” “found footage,” “Merz pictures,” “versioning,” “readymades,” “cut-ups,” “recombinant art,” “mashups” (sometimes hyphenated as “mash-ups”), “remix,” “bootlegs,” “bastard pop,” and so on.⁵

Gunkel notes how the “and so on” at the end of such a list can be connected with Judith Butler’s discussion of the “*supplément*, the excess” of the “embarrassed” and “exasperated” *etcetera* and the ways this final addendum always fails to provide any real closure. Instead it “indicates the impossibility of any such list to be complete, comprehensive, and total.”⁶ This lack of closure marks the field of remix studies. The objects, methods, and theories of remix remain multiple and heterodox. Gunkel demonstrates this throughout his work with a theoretical mashup that makes use of Baudrillard, Deleuze, Derrida, Žižek, etc. Again, the *etcetera* fails to close the list. To add to this theoretical mashup, one could also approach this cluster of theoretical insights through the work of many other writers as well. New forms of remix continually emerge and are added into the mix and so too are new theories. The fact that we can address remix from multiple

² Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Samuel Moore, and David McLellan, *The Communist Manifesto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 6.

³ Martin Jay, “‘The Aesthetic Ideology’ as Ideology; Or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?” *Cultural Critique*, no. 21 (1992), 45.

⁴ David J. Gunkel, *Of Remixology: Ethics and Aesthetics After Remix* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), xvii.

⁵ Gunkel, *Of Remixology*, 3-4.

⁶ Gunkel, *Of Remixology*, 19-20.

theoretical perspectives is yet another consequence of remix itself. It would be a sort of performative contradiction to argue that remix remains an open-ended category and at the same time hold that there is only a single theory able to articulate it. This point will perhaps help justify my own selection of the heterodox examples below as well as the heterodox theorists used to help explore and explain those examples. This essay will tend to draw on the work of Walter Benjamin along with Sigmund Freud, but clearly other choices would also be possible.

Beginning with Freud, perhaps the most helpful concept to be drawn from psychoanalytic theory for understanding remix culture is that of “repetition compulsion.” Freud’s conjecture is that, at root, “*an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things.*”⁷ We can only desire things that we have already known, that is, things we have experienced in the past. The instincts seek to repeat and restore those previous states. On this view, life becomes an elaborate hunt for the repetition of the same. We seek the same pleasures and satisfactions we once knew even if we seek them in the guise of new relationships and new experiences. The hunt is never really for the new. It is always a search for the repetition of a previous satisfaction gained from something long lost in the past. “Remix,” then, can be understood as simply a very new name of a very old compulsion to repeat. Remix is quite literally the re-appearance of something we have seen before. We find pleasure in these repetitions of older media and find still more pleasure as each new remix is itself sampled, repeated, and remixed back to us yet again.

For Benjamin, a new mode of artistic production is ushered in by capitalism along with the introduction of the new technologies of sound recording, photography, and motion pictures. With these new methods, art suddenly became mechanically reproducible, and so, unhinged from the longstanding presence of an original, authentic work of art produced directly by the hand of the artist, or a singular, unique live performance of music, dance, or theater produced one time only by the artist and then lost forever. Art was no longer something available only to the very few gathered in opera houses and cathedrals to bask in the aura of a one-of-a-kind work of art. Instead, art became something accessible to the masses. Recordings, photographs, and films began to circulate in movie theaters, newspapers, books, magazines, sound recordings, and radio broadcasts. There was no longer a limit to the number of places a work of art could be shown, the number of times a performance can be enjoyed, or the number of people who may experience it. Art began to spread itself across time, space, and class.

These changes in artistic production had other consequences as well. For Benjamin, the fact that works of art became something we consume collectively also transforms the experience of viewing art. Today, we watch movies in crowds and with crowds of others from around the globe. We listen to music that multitudes of others have already heard and judged with approval or disapproval. Even when streaming a movie alone at home, we stream content that millions of others have been watching, talking about, recommending, and criticizing. Music charts, television ratings, online views, and other metrics track the popularity of artists among the masses and becomes part of the process of both producing and consuming popular culture. This is a fundamentally new way to consume art and it emerged alongside and through the emergence of global capitalism. For Benjamin, the collective experience of consuming art and popular culture united “the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public” and created some newly progressive potential for art that was never possible before.⁸ Audiences experience the work of art together, and simultaneously practice art criticism together. Clear examples of this can be found in the active and passionate online discussions within various fandoms. Even the aggregated online movie reviews and ratings of *Rotten Tomatoes* testify to this cultivation of a new collective and participatory critical eye.

This capitalist transformation of the mode of production of art and its attendant transformations in the social relations of artistic production also opened up a new space for class conflict. This newly emancipated and democratized access to art became yet another site for class struggle, and like every moment of class struggle, there are always two competing and conflicting class interests at work trying to shape and control the field of struggle. In Benjamin’s time and place this struggle was shaped by fascist versus communist uses and appropriations of a newly reproducible art. Benjamin’s enduring insight was to note the ways that

⁷ Sigmund Freud and James Strachey, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: Norton, 1990), 43.

⁸ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 234.

“Fascism is rendering aesthetic” both politics and war.⁹ Fascism aimed at transforming politics into a spectacle for consumption and entertainment, and even war was waged and produced as a spectacle that was now part theater and part sporting event. Thus, Hitler’s extraordinary propaganda machine worked to aestheticize the leader, the Nazi party, and the Nazi war machine. The uniforms, pageantry, rallies, parades, flags, etc. all became crucial elements of the spectacular visual politics of fascism and the National Socialist Party, and the new technologies for the reproduction of art served to spread and popularize these images. For instance, the films of Leni Riefenstahl, such as her *Triumph of the Will* (1935), famously reproduced and represented Hitler and his spectacles as triumphant, idealized, and beautiful. Riefenstahl aestheticized the politics of fascism in ways that had never been seen before and used these new technologies of art to further its own political ends.¹⁰

According to Benjamin, the communist response to this aestheticization of politics by fascism was to attempt to resist the fascist colonization of art and aesthetics “by politicizing art.”¹¹ This politicization of art was made possible by the same technologies of mechanical reproduction but repurposed by a different class for very different ends. The masses now experienced art together in theaters and on the radio, and this shared experience of art led to the development of a shared, collective criticism as well. This shared critical consciousness provided the grounds for a newly politically aware, anti-fascist practice of art and mass culture. Benjamin argued that one paradigm for this politicized art can be found in the captioned photograph. He writes:

photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them. They stir the viewer; he feels challenged by them in a new way. At the same time picture magazines begin to put up signposts for him, right ones or wrong ones, no matter. For the first time, captions have become obligatory.¹²

The caption under a photograph added an explicitly political dimension to the image. It became a way to explicitly politicize art. An image may be art. An image plus a slogan is politics.

This choice of examples by Benjamin was somewhat prescient. Images with captions are the lifeblood of the internet. Memes and image macros of all types fit easily under this rubric. Songs also now serve the function of captions for videos. Just as a caption can be added to an image to give it a political meaning, so too a song can be remixed with a video to give it a very new and very specific political identity and impact. Benjamin’s analysis of this inbuilt class division within the politics of remix culture is becoming increasingly salient today. Coupled with Freud’s notion of the compulsion to repeat, these ideas may help shed some light on some troubling examples from the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.

Fascist Repetitions

The term “alt-right” has recently been added to the list of far-right epithets, alongside “neo-Nazi,” “fascist,” “white nationalist,” “white supremacist,” etc. Here the *supplément* of the trailing *etcetera* is a more literal embarrassment. It is embarrassing to have so many names for something so dangerous, damaging, and evil. It is also embarrassing that the list remains open and continues to grow. The term “alt-right” is usually attributed to Richard Spencer, a white nationalist who coined the name in an effort to make more palatable

⁹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 242.

¹⁰ Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” *October* 62 (1992), 38.

¹¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 242.

¹² Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 226.

a conservative ideology that is unashamed of its openly racist and anti-Semitic views. As the Anti-Defamation League notes, “It has a loud presence online.”¹³ Its principal home, until recently, has been almost exclusively online in places such as 4chan’s “Politically Incorrect” /pol/ board. Such sites have served as a forcing house for the creation of right-wing memes that aim to repackaging and popularize well-worn racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, transphobic, and xenophobic rhetorics for a new generation. One of their most popular creations to date has been the remix of Pepe the Frog.¹⁴

Pepe the Frog is a character originally created by Matt Furie for the online comic *Boys Club* with no hint of anti-Semitic content or any other hate speech connotations. The character was repurposed as a meme, usually in innocuous, humorous contexts along with his catch-phrase, “Feels good man.” These memes circulated widely online, eventually finding their way to white nationalist discussion boards where they were remixed yet again with Nazi content and overtly anti-Semitic messages. Pepe the Frog succeeded in putting a harmless cartoon face on a violent ideology. As the 2016 Presidential campaign unfolded and Donald Trump’s xenophobic rhetoric took on more explicitly racist and white nationalist tones, the Pepe the Frog meme was remixed yet again with Donald Trump’s iconic hairstyle and morphed into a kind of unofficial mascot for Trump supporters who shared in the alt-right’s particular brand of white nationalism. By September of 2016, the Anti-Defamation League had added Pepe the Frog to its list of hate symbols.¹⁵ “This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic,” to use Benjamin’s words.¹⁶ The cartoon Pepe is now a happy, innocent looking emblem that serves to identify fascist, and fascist-adjacent, sympathizers to each other and to market their beliefs to others as a fundamentally harmless, friendly, and good-natured political movement. Everyone loves a smiling frog. The three images below capture this genesis of Pepe the Frog from simple cartoon to symbol of hate.¹⁷



¹³ “Alt-Right: A Primer about the New White Supremacy,” *Anti-Defamation League*, accessed February 4, 2017, www.adl.org/combating-hate/domestic-extremism-terrorism/c/alt-right-a-primer-about-the.html#.WIOH8LYrKfQ

¹⁴ “Pepe the Frog,” *Anti-Defamation League*, accessed February 4, 2017, www.adl.org/combating-hate/hate-on-display/c/pepe-the-frog.html#.WIN7krYrKfQ

¹⁵ “Press Release: ADL Adds ‘Pepe the Frog’ Meme, Used by Anti-Semites and Racists, to Online Hate Symbols Database.” *Anti-Defamation League*. Accessed February 4, 2017. www.adl.org/press-center/press-releases/extremism/adl-adds-pepe-the-frog-online-hate-symbols-database.html#.WITPgrYrKfQ

¹⁶ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 242.

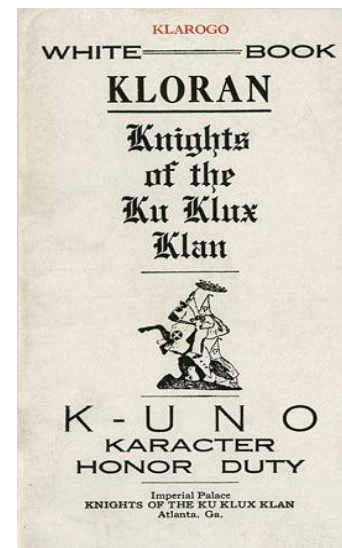
¹⁷ “File: Feels good man.jpg,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 4, 2017, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Feels_good_man.jpg; “White Nationalist Pepe Gold,” *Imgur*, accessed February 4, 2017, imgur.com/a/0YhIM; “Can’t Stump the Trump,” *Know Your Meme*, accessed February 4, 2017, knowyourmeme.com/photos/1029115-can-t-stump-the-trump.

This cartoon remix of pop culture, anti-Semitism, and electoral politics is what the aestheticizing of fascist politics looks like today. It makes hate lovable, and provides an adorable and innocuous substitute icon that sanitizes and obscures its more horrific origins and views. This is not the same polished grandeur of a Leni Riefenstahl-esque style. Instead, it draws from contemporary pop culture and leans more heavily towards the comic book, professional wrestling, and reality television end of the aesthetics spectrum. This does not vitiate Benjamin's claims, rather, it reinforces them. Benjamin often championed low culture against high.¹⁸ From the belligerent tweets of Donald Trump, to the cult of personality, the hair, the staging of violent rallies, the call to build a "big, beautiful, powerful wall,"¹⁹ the theatrical signing of executive orders, Trump's bizarrely idealized portraits of himself, the anger over an insufficiently spectacular inauguration and over the use unflattering photographs of the leader, these all fit Benjamin's picture of an aestheticized fascist politics aimed at pacifying, distracting, and deceiving the public.²⁰ Even the acrimony surrounding these events have become part of the show.

The fascist penchant for aestheticizing war can also be found in the transformed way in which elections are now waged. They have become extraordinarily partisan and agonistic. Winning is the only goal. The skill and fervor devoted to campaigning often eclipses any skill or knowledge about actual governance, and the distinction between campaigning and governing has begun to fade. Benjamin's argument can help illuminate this dichotomy. The faux battle at the polls is now watched and consumed as if it is an actual battle between opposing forces. Passions run high and winning becomes paramount. The corollary to the new-found seriousness of national electoral battles may be that actual war becomes seen as less real and less consequential. Actual slaughter in Syria and Iraq incite far less passion in the U.S. than the release of the latest poll numbers. This may be the new face of fascist politics where the aesthetics of war and conquest, victors and vanquished, spills over and supplants the more mundane discussion of policy, democratic institutions, and electoral processes.

Remix racism is not new to the far-right, and it has a history that extends back further than Nazi Germany. The Ku Klux Klan was a pioneer in the field after its reemergence in the U.S. during the early decades of the twentieth century. In an almost unbearable irony, the official handbook of The Ku Klux Klan containing all its ceremonies, offices, and doctrines is called "The Kloran," a mashup of the words 'Klan' and 'Koran'.

The pamphlet is easily found online and is even available for purchase on Amazon for \$11.95. It should be noted that Amazon does at least list the work under the heading of "Fascism."²¹ This repurposing of the name of Islam's most sacred text as the title for the Klan's own handbook took place in about 1916.²² Given the current anti-Islamic beliefs circulating in the U.S. and embraced and promulgated by the Klan, this use could be viewed as problematic. However, self-awareness and a sense of irony have never been strong suits of the organization. For instance, the phrase K-UNO on the cover of the "Kloran," also appropriates the Spanish word for "one" to designate the first level of probationary membership in the Klan. This too is a somewhat jarring repurposing of a culture to which the Klan remains openly hostile. The



¹⁸ Peter Osborne, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, Volume III: Appropriations* (London: Routledge, 2005), 334-335.

¹⁹ "Trump on Immigration Plan: 'Start by Building a Big, Beautiful, Powerful Wall.'" *YouTube*, August 18, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=80cY76l-pMQ.

²⁰ Amy E. Mendes, "Digital Demagogue: The Critical Candidacy of Donald J. Trump," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 6, no. 3/4 (2016), 62-73.

²¹ "Kloran: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan," *Amazon*, accessed February 5, 2017, <http://www.amazon.com/Kloran-Knights-Ku-Klux-Klan/dp/153293033X>.

²² "Ku Klux Klan – History," *Anti-Defamation League*, accessed February 5, 2017, archive.adl.org/learn/ext_us/kkk/history.html.

Ku Klux Klan, despite its stated aim of white separatism and purity, was clearly an early adopter and enthusiastic practitioner of remix culture and politics when it suited their own purposes.

Remixing Anti-Fascism

The fascist uses of remix, however, never have the final word. As Benjamin argues, class struggle always continues on every front. There are abundant examples online of white supremacist memes being remixed and recirculated for anti-fascist purposes. For instance, one Facebook group, “w e i r d ~ ~ ~ A p p a l a c h i a,” has been the source of a number of recent anti-fascist memes and graphics aimed at re-appropriating images and stereotypes of the south that have all too often been used as symbols of racism and white supremacy. If the use of Pepe the Frog seeks to aestheticize fascism, then “w e i r d ~ ~ ~ A p p a l a c h i a” seeks to politicize art. The shared, collective experience of negative stereotypes of Appalachian culture as backward and racist has helped shape a shared, collective response to the election year escalation and redeployment of those stereotypes. Below is just one example from the group where a variety of Appalachian icons are remixed along with a communist hammer and sickle into an anti-fascist and anti-racist meme captioned in an unmistakably Appalachian dialect. The confederate flag figure had previously circulated online alongside “Trump 2016” emblems.²³ The graphic draws a sharp contrast between the fascist appropriations of the confederate flag to conjure and normalize the history of white, southern racism and the Appalachian communist character who literally skewers that racist icon.²⁴

This use of remix to combat fascism has also already occurred in response to the aestheticized symbol of Pepe the Frog. Matt Furie, Pepe’s creator has launched a #Save-Pepe campaign to “share positive images of the frog an in attempt to rehabilitate him and move his image out of the realm of hate speech.”²⁵ The alt-right’s most visible spokesperson, Richard Spencer, was himself recently transformed into an anti-fascist meme when he was filmed being punched at Donald Trump’s inauguration while in the middle of explaining the decorative Pepe the Frog lapel pin he was wearing that day. This unexpected remix of Pepe quickly went viral as the video of Richard Spencer being punched by a hooded protester was remixed hundreds of times, spreading widely online and sparking a variety of lively and intense discussions on the history, ethics, politics, and efficacy of punching Nazis.²⁶ Matt Furie’s response to the punch was simply “once is never enough.”²⁷ The video has been re-captioned with songs such as “X Gon’



²³ “Donald Trump Auto Decal Riles Social Media,” *Snopes*, October 16, 2016, <http://www.snopes.com/2016/10/16/donald-trump-auto-decal-riles-social-media/>.

²⁴ “w e i r d ~ ~ ~ A p p a l a c h i a,” *Facebook*, accessed February 5, 2017, <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=321784114850694&set=g.1014792528615131&type=1&theater>

²⁵ “Press Release: ADL Joins With ‘Pepe’ Creator Matt Furie in Social Media Campaign to #SavePepe,” *Anti-Defamation League*, accessed February 5, 2017, www.adl.org/press-center/press-releases/extremism/adl-joins-with-pepe-the-frog-creator-social-media-campaign-save-pepe.html#.WI9C2rYrKfR.

²⁶ Abby Ohlheiser, “A Step-By-Step Guide to a Meme About Punching a Nazi in the Face,” *Washington Post*, January 23, 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/01/23/a-step-by-step-guide-to-a-meme-about-punching-a-nazi-in-the-face/?utm_term=.fb13c585e6d0.

²⁷ Matt Furie, *Tumblr*, accessed February 5, 2017, mattfurie.tumblr.com/post/156244589277.

To Give It To Ya,” “Nazi Punks Fuck Off,” and Disney’s *Frozen*’s, “Let It Go.” Each new remix adds its own slightly different political framing of video along with its own slightly different anti-fascist sentiments. This version of the punch is remixed with Bruce Springsteen’s bitter anthem, “Born in the USA.”²⁸

Once again, repetition is key. It is the repetition, across multiple remixes and even within a single remix, that tends to make remix itself a possible source of pleasure for us, and so also, a possible political force for us. Remix is almost by definition a recurrence of the same, a re-experiencing of something we have already enjoyed in the past.

In the above Springsteen remix, the punch is repeated dozens of times. Each punch is delivered on the repetitive, steady, yet undeniably pleasurable, rock and roll backbeat of the E Street Band. The beat is on the beat as it were. This repetitive, re-experiencing of the same is fundamental to Freud’s account of the pleasure principle. For Freud, we quite literally only enjoy things we have experienced before. Those re-awakenings of past



pleasurable experiences may come to us in forms that seem new to us, but the fact that they are sources of pleasure at all is testimony to their ultimate familiarity. Remix exploits this source pleasure in one of the most unsubtle ways possible. It provides an excess of pleasure and enjoyment by providing an excess of repetitions. A single meme is never enough. A single remix is never enough. There is no real need for over a thousand remixes of Richard Spencer getting punched. One possible explanation for their existence, though, is because of the pleasure such overflowing excess and exuberance provides our aggressive instinct’s desire for satisfaction by repetition of more of the same.

Concluding Repetitions

One oft criticized, but still oft repeated, piece of advice on public speaking says, “Tell the audience what you’re going to say, say it; then tell them what you’ve said.” Usually attributed to Dale Carnegie, this rhetorical pattern also finds itself at home in academic writing. An introduction to say what you will say, the body of the article to say it, then a conclusion to say what you said. This too might be understood as another aspect of the power of repetition and of the pleasures associated with the reappearance of the familiar and already known. So one final repetition may be in order here.

This essay has traced part of the journey from Walter Benjamin’s reflections on art and its conditions of production and reproduction in 1936 to our current digital technologies of art with their vastly expanded capabilities for reproduction. In Benjamin’s day, Nazi Germany was on the rise and along with it a disturbing trend of aestheticizing and beautifying the politics of fascism as a way of making it attractive to audiences. Today we are encountering a new form of American fascism that repeats and remixes much of the racism and anti-Semitism of the earlier Nazi era and again seeks to aestheticize itself as a way of making itself palatable and broadening its appeal. We are also seeing a very similar response to the one identified

²⁸ “Neo-Nazi Richard Spencer Getting Punched in the Face (Bruce Springsteen - Born In The U.S.A.),” *YouTube*, January 26, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=huoVOe7Rwok.

by Benjamin. The same digital tools being used by fascists are simultaneously being used against fascists through the production of a politicized, anti-fascist art that is both a response and a weapon against fascism. The struggle continues even though the terrain has shifted.

The remix of racism, anti-Semitism, and fascism has become a potent force in our current political culture. It is in the White House. It is in the news. It is a part of daily life. At this point, perhaps it is appropriate to end this essay the way it began with one final repetition by way of another quote from Paul Valéry, "Power without abuse loses its charm."²⁹ This one line may provide us with a far shorter explanation for the current allure of our incipient fascism. The new politics of abuse, cronyism, corruption, cruelty, and violence are also a kind of remix and repetition of the past. They are all things we have seen before under fascism. Sadly, far too many seem to greet this abusive remix and repetition with all the pleasurable fondness and charm of nostalgia. Fortunately, the remix resistance to this abusive fascist politics is an equally inescapable part of our culture, and it is growing too.

²⁹ Paul Valéry, *Tel Quel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 40.